

Echoes

by FantasticJackie

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****AN:**** This is AU, but it's based on as much canon as I can possibly squeeze in, including the novels and SpOps. The original plunny was inspired by ****YappiChick**** in early 2012, but as I considered the plot, I decided to wait until Halo 4 came out.

****Dedication:**** I'm writing this for ****YappiChick**** who is an epic Halo fangirl beyond measure and a good friend befitting legendary status. I hope this fic can start to repay in kind all the mythicness you've bestowed upon me! :D

****Echoes**

>****Prologue****

0917 Hours, August 06, 2557 (Military Calendar)

>2 Weeks After New Phoenix Event
Forerunner Planet Breccia

>Covenant Base of Operations & Chief Point of Interest<p>

Aubergine blood splattered the cliff face with the brain matter of two Covenant jackals. The Master Chief watched their lifeless bodies

tumble after their beam rifles, down the rocky escarpment; a moment later, the deep crack of sniper fire echoed through the valley, drawing the attention of every sentry stationed outside the Forerunner structure. Grunts had barely a chance to nervously chatter among themselves before explosions demolished the sizeable gathering of forces guarding the eastern entrance. Long range bullets dropped elite after grunt after jackal; in a matter of seconds, the base had become a frenzy of confusion and death.

And that was before Spartan Trenton Davis in his hijacked Wraith began pounding the outer southern defenses.

Crouched inside a shallow cave behind a large boulder roughly four hundred meters from the western entrance, John-117 watched the carnage below. His point of entry remained well-guarded, with several squads of alien fighters streaming out to aid in the battle. Two green lights winked on his HUD indicating the next phase of their plan: Spartans Drake Donovan and Eddie Morgan had successfully planted charges on the Covenant battlecruiser hovering overhead. The Chief noted two Banshees leaving the ship just as more explosions thundered inside the hull, igniting a chain reaction. As the ship listed eerily off kilter, the Covenant ranks aboard began a panicked exodus from the open decks, many without so much as a Ghost to break their suicidal leaps. Seconds later, the cruiser blasted into pieces, and the group surrounding the western access at last began to disperse.

With the Spartans of Fireteam Valor drawing all attention, John slipped from his position, sliding down into the dense foliage below. He hit the ground running.

Thousands of years before, the structure had been built to support a defensible position at the valley's pointed edge. Though overgrown by vegetation, it was recognizable enough in its aesthetic design to be distinctly Forerunner, having three entrances, all of which boasted a large compliment of Covenant guards. Hostile AI's had yet to make a presence, but the Chief knew whatever was housed inside the structure was sure to have its own defense.

"Double D, I think they know we're here," Spartan Bryant Coleman commed suddenly. "I've got an eye on two more battlecruisers on approach."

"Now we're talking!" Donovan replied excitedly. "Valor, COMs are free again. Light 'em up, and show these hingeheads what retaliation _really_ looks like!"

This site on Breccia was the only area of interest to the Covenant. A world in ruins, there was little else to attract them. The Master Chief had requested to join the pursuit of the so-called Didact's Hand, Jul 'Mdama, after he had launched a retaliatory attack on a string of UNSC outposts. Claiming vengeance for the murder of the Didact, Jul laid waste to several key scientific research facilities before the _Infinity_ and a large accompanying fleet scattered the attack force. Tracking 'Mdama afterwards had led the Infinity to this unexplored sector of the galaxy, but it was John's relentless recon flights with Valor that had uncovered the Covenant's true destination. As for what they were after, it was still a mystery.

Twin suns peeked over the ridges of the mountains with barely a cloud in the sky, their light glittering down on the canopy below. John moved quickly between thick tree trunks and waist high flora, the forest green of his MJOLNIR armor blending perfectly with the terrain. His approach was obscured by gnarled, low branches and the dappled patterns of leaves' shadows; the heavy tread of his boots seemed insignificant compared to the surrounding plasma fire and explosions.

"You always bring me to such nice places."

The instruments measuring his vitals registered a momentary, slight uptick in heart rate. John gripped his MA5D assault rifle a little more tightly, but otherwise disregarded her too-familiar voice. As expected, getting through this op without her echoed comments from the past wasn't going to happen. He would have to ignore "her" for the duration of the mission.

Having reached the edge of the surrounding forest, the Chief slowed his gait and crouched low. The small clearing before the entrance retained a paltry defense of five cowardly grunts, each distracted by Valor's continued assault. He flipped on his active camouflage, and crept towards the entrance.

Rather than drawing the attention of whatever leftover force remained inside, John refrained from taking any action against the grunts. He was almost through the open doorway when one of the Unggoys noted the jumbled smattering of blips on its motion tracker and panicked. Throwing its hands up with a squeal of terror, it ran past the Chief as quickly as its short legs could carry it, and was followed in perfect imitation by its four companions. John wondered if they were aware their retreat would plant them directly in Spartan Davis' path.

"I almost feel sorry for themâ€¦!"

Deactivating the camo, the Chief continued inside the compound and accessed the schematic Spartan Esprit McKnight had acquired from a terminal when they had landed. Manually through a quick set of screens that were becoming resentfully familiar, he set a waypoint for the structure's inner sanctum; it was a safe assumption that the Covenant's goal â€" 'Mdama's goal â€" was located there.

Aside from its size, the interior of the complex resembled most of the constructions with which the Chief had become thoroughly acquainted in recent years. With towering ceilings and wide passageways, gray Forerunner metal composed the majority of the well-lit compound. Recurring geometric glass panels and ornamentation marked the pathways and rooms. By comparison to the Halos or Requiem though, this solitary building was far more compact in design; based off initial scans, the _Infinity's_ shipboard AI Roland had detected a finite number of functioning outposts on the planet. Breccia was an abandoned world of jagged mountain ranges and overabundant valleys teeming with weathered, jutting wreckage that attested to the violent destruction of an advanced civilization. The UNSC's limited knowledge of ancient Forerunner history recognized the possibility that the Flood may have been the aggressor in this conflict, but there were no signs of the parasite present.

Gruff Sangheili commands reached the Master Chief's ears, warning him

of the company of guards in the next room before his radar picked up their movements. Uncharacteristically, anticipation built in John's gut, adrenaline tempting him to rush into the fight. Such irrational impulses were foreign to the Spartan, but recently, he could not deny that he craved the release he found only in battle.

Peering discreetly into the room, he found a small party of mostly jackals and two low rank elites. They stood casually at the exit, drawn shields resting at their sides. The Chief tossed a well-timed fragmentation grenade in their midst; as it exploded on impact, killing most of them instantly, he stepped through the doorway, firing his assault rifle in short bursts to pick off the survivors. Before the dust began to settle from the explosion, they were all dead, and he sprinted ahead deeper into the structure, dropping the exhausted mag as he went.

Through the maze of corridors and rooms he continued in like manner, brutally and efficiently demolishing the Covenant defenses until at last, he had almost reached the target location.

As he approached the far wall, the Chief's motion tracker displayed more and more contacts waiting just on the other side. According to the map, rounding the next corner would put him in a wide corridor some fifty meters long. Several small rooms lined its passage, but finding effective cover once in the hall was unlikely.

Searching his surroundings for tactical options, ignoring the feeling of emptiness it evoked, he noticed a panel in the wall opposite him. He took a chance and destroyed the controls. As luck would have it, the corridor and all surrounding rooms were suddenly plunged into complete darkness. Shouts of fear from the hall followed; he activated his HUD's night vision.

After that, John didn't think.

Light came only in bursts from fired rounds. Grunts, whether of their volition or at the command of their leaders, primed plasma grenades in each hand and ran toward the Chief's last known position in hopes of revealing him with their sacrifices. They never made it far; John's M6H pistol made quick work of downing them.

In the darkness, salvos were lucky to graze his shields. He moved quickly between targets, conserving ammunition as much as he could to hide his location, instead twisting necks and inflicting lethal blows. Each strike propelled him to move faster, to hit harder, until his body could no longer keep up with the urges. His heart pounded in his chest, and in his mind, a buzz of intensity crescendoed to compete with the din of battle around him. Time seemed to slow, all focus devoted to the next kill. He slammed a jackal into the wall, flattening its chest cavity with a crunch, having no idea how many he had killed before or how many were yet to come. John allowed the numbing reprieve from thought to overtake his conscious.

When at last the lights flickered back on at the behest of a Huragok, only three stunned Sangheilis remained. Mandibles hanging wide, they surveyed the corridor behind the Chief, scorched and bloodied with piles of bodies.

"Something on your mind?"

"Demon!" they seethed, aiming their weapons.

The Master Chief dodged their fire, diving into one of the rooms to his right. Flicking on his active camouflage, he slunk back into the hall. The elites were sticking together in a loose formation, eyes trained on the doorway where John had just been. He kept his distance to avoid alerting their motion trackers, and circled their position until he was behind them. Deactivating the camo, he snuck to the closest one, and performed a quick assassination. Its companions swung around in outrage, charging and firing at the Chief, but their rounds were caught by the dead elite he still held.

One-handed, John loosed a full mag of his AR into the elite to his right, but still it charged, energy shields flickering. He dropped the body, and backed away to dodge their shots, simultaneously reloading. Another well-aimed twenty bullets took care of the second alien, and the Chief trained his weapon on the last enemy. He didn't hesitate when the magazine was spent, fluidly thrusting the rifle butt into the skull of the elite once, twice, three times until it crumpled, dead. Immediately behind him, he heard the swish of an energy sword powering up. He angled himself to avoid the camouflaged Sangheili's lunge, reaching to grab its invisible arm and rip the blade from its grasp. In another instant, the sword was buried through the alien's midsection, its dying breath a roar of surprise. The body faded into view a moment later, and the Chief gently let the golden armored general down.

The abrupt stillness that followed felt foreign and stale and far too tangible.

Without any comment from Cortana, even an echoed one, reality weighed heavily in his chest. The battle had not lasted nearly long enough.

Rushed, heavy boots echoing down the hall had John tensing for a brief moment, until he recognized the IFF tag: Spartan Esprit McKnight. She rounded the corner at the now far end where he had originally entered, her SRS-95 AM sniper rifle in hand. She froze at the sight.

"Whoaâ€¦!" she said by way of greeting, taking it all in.

Esprit was a former Marine, part of the first wave of Spartan IV's produced. She was reserved though outgoing in personality. She claimed to have met, or rather seen as she put it, John before on the Cairo, but he had no memory of her. A skilled sharp shooter and agile in close combat, she was also a talented hacker and programmer. John was supposed to have waited for her before entering the structure.

John pulled the empty cartridge from his rifle and placed the gun on his back: he was out of ammo.

"Not questioning your orders at all, Chief," she said starting forward again and picking her way through the bodies to reach him. "Or suggesting you needed any help, apparently, but waiting just five minutes could have made this a lot less dangerous." She passed him two magazines which he gratefully took.

"This war has enough dead heroes."

"Five minutes may have been too long," he countered. "How are things outside?"

"Well in hand," she assured him. "Nothing to worry about there."

"Good. Let's find out what the Covenant was after."

When they stepped through the large door, it was into a wide space, brightly lit and humming from the data streams. The room was packed with consoles and controls, holographic windows hovering above each displaying thousands of glyphs and images. Terminals lined the walls, and three rings of additional consoles took up the room's center. The handful of enemy dots on radar turned out to be several Huragok absorbed by their work in the centermost terminal. Agitated or perhaps distressed, some the Covenant engineers swelled and deflated to express their misgivings while others whistled at each other. Their tentacles and cila scrambled over the controls and screens; the glyphs blinking on the holographic window seemed to be the cause of their anxiety.

Esprit took the liberty of shoos the engineers away. She corralled them into a corner of the room where a few began tinkering with the panels there while others devoted their attentions to the Chief as he approached the problematic terminal.

"Any idea what we're looking for?" the Chief asked. His eyes strayed to a port that would have accommodated Cortana's chip, and he quickly looked away.

Esprit breathed a chuckle. "Not even the first clue."

Glyphs streamed through the window almost faster than John could decipher. The glyphs meant nothing to him with the exception of one.

"Hey wait a secondâ€¦" Esprit stepped closer to the holoscreen. "That's the Forerunner symbol for-"

"Reclaimer," John said in tandem with her, and he reached out to touch the glyph just as it passed through again.

The screens and controls pulsed blue, Reclaimer more brightly than the other symbols. They rearranged themselves in configurations that held no meaning to the Spartans, though in the corner, the Huragok whistled and cooed excitedly. When the symbols had achieved their desired formation, the controls dimmed, and a single contact rose from the centermost console.

"This looks familiar," the Chief commented.

"Maybe we should just destroy it."

He shook his head, the Librarian's invaluable assistance foremost in his mind. "We don't even know what it is, yet." If whatever this was turned out to be dangerous, he would face it then. Decision made, he placed his hand on the contact.

Immediately, at the very center of the room, in the midst of all the

consoles and controls, a small hole opened in the ground. Rectangular and plain, a plinth began to rise from beneath the room. Atop the plinth was a small device with lit bluish white geometric patterns and glyphs glowing on the sides. The Chief reached for it as it came to a halt.

It was a small cylinder, maybe twenty-five centimeters tall with holographic emitters on the top. When he thumbed over one of the light nodules, a dense, slowly rotating star chart materialized from the emitters with more symbols hovering beside several planetary bodies.

"I'm still developing it," Esprit began quietly, "But Chief, my translation program isn't recognizing any of these symbols."

"Meaning?"

"I have no idea."

"So it does exist. At last, I can find advantage in her meddling."

John whipped around, weapon drawn; Esprit did the same beside him, yet they saw only the empty room.

The unmistakable voice of the Didact continued: "Typical that it would reveal itself to you. Her ability to plan and influence throughout this galaxy has always been unrivaled."

"Show yourself," John demanded.

There was a pause. And then, "I see you are at a disadvantage without your ancilla," his disembodied voice taunted. "Your new companion by comparison leaves much to be desired." Toward the outermost console, a holo image of the Promethean leader materialized atop a Covenant COMs device. He was fully armored, even his face covered. "Settle your nerves, Warrior. The time for my recompense has not yet arrived."

"This is not happening," McKnight said under her breath, slowly approaching the unit with the Chief.

In John's lifelong military service, he had never harbored any specific feeling or sentiment toward his enemies. He had been taught at a very young age to destroy the enemy, whatever the cost or sacrifices, that allowing adversaries to influence emotions only clouded one's judgment. It was a code he lived by. However, looking upon the visage of the Didact, John struggled to find that sense of equanimity.

"Do you have nothing to say or do you merely doubt your senses?" To underscore the point of his survival, he revealed his face. The same as before, the Didact seemed unscathed from their encounter.

"How did you survive?" the Master Chief asked.

"You are not the only being to have undergone a mutation rendering you immune to the effects of the Composer, human."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Does it matter?" he countered. "Your failure to end me was only preceded by a thousand likewise futile attempts. Spare yourself the adversity of conflict with me and surrender the Atlas at once."

As he spoke, dots of motion peppered the Chief's radar - ten, twenty, then too many to count.

"Threat level increasing!"

Through vents and access shafts, Sentinels poured into the room, surrounding the two Spartans. They filled the space, hovering in a tightly knit circle, watching, and still more were coming. From the corner of the room, explosions sounded among whines and Sentinel beam fire: the Huragok were dead.

Esprit had already lined up a shot when John reached out and pushed the barrel down. "Wait," he ordered. These AIs never hesitated in attacking their targetsâ€|

"Impossible," the Didact exclaimed.

But it was more than possible, especially, it seemed to John, when the Promethean's wife was involved. As quickly as they had arrived, the Sentinels crowded out through the corridor, presumably to secure the structure from unauthorized intruders.

"It would appear I am powerless to stop you at this time," the Didact observed wrly.

John loosed one of the M168 Demolition Charges from the magnetized holding plate on his back and tossed it to Esprit. "Set the timer for 10 minutes. Make sure nothing's left standing."

"Sure thing, Chief." With one last look at the Didact's image, she crossed to the center of the room.

"When we meet again, Warrior, I will-"

The Chief fired his AR bullets at the communication device, cutting off whatever else the Didact had intended to tell him with an electrical sputter and a small puff of smoke.

"Hoorah!" Esprit cheered.

"Donovan to Master Chief," commed the leader of Fireteam Valor. "What the h-ll did you do in there? We just got swarms of friendly Sentinel reinforcements; they're tearing the Covenant apart!"

"McKnight and I are exiting the structure with an artifact of unknown specification. We're setting the structure to blow in ten minutes."

"Roger that. I'll get Infinity on the line.-"

"Infinity to Fireteam Valor," interrupted Commander Palmer's voice. "The Captain sends his fondest regards. Whatever you did down there, there's now a whole army of Sentinels tearing up the Covvie's fleet. They're retreating. You didn't just secure the site; the whole d-mn

planet is ours! Radio silence is no longer needed; we're sending someone to get you."

"Perfect timing, Commander," Donovan answered. "We were just about to ask."

"Well? Don't hold me in suspense, Spartan. What did you find?"

"Spartan McKnight and the Chief found some sort of artifact inside the structure. They're exiting now, and they rigged the compound to blow."

"Excellent. I'll have Science on deck for when you arrive. Anything else?"

"Uhâ€|"

"Yes Commander, there was one other thing," Esprit interjected with a glance at the Chief. He gave no response, directing his full attention to setting the last of the charges on a critical support just inside the structure.

"I'm listening, McKnight."

"The uhâ€|" She cleared her throat before continuing quickly. "We ran into the Didact. He's still working with the Covenant, and he was the one after this 'Atlas.'"

"Come again? Did you just say Didact?"

"Wish I hadn't."

O-O-O

"We didn't get him, did we?" Palmer asked flatly even as Valor and the Chief were coming down the Pelican's ramp. In the landing bay of the Infinity, a small welcome team of the Commander, a handful of scientists, the ship's AI Roland, and Captain Thomas Lasky had assembled.

Donovan hesitated. "No, Commander. If 'Mdama was here, he wasn't planetside."

Palmer cursed quietly.

"You're sure it was him? â€" The Didact?" Lasky wanted to know. He directed his gaze first at John and then to the others. Esprit had regaled the tale over COMs on the return flight, but accepting the truth of the circumstances was proving to be a challenge to everyone.

"There's no mistaking, Captain," John answered, the first time he had spoken since leaving the planet. "It was him."

As the room exploded into reaction and conversation, for his part, Lasky said nothing. His perceptive gaze was locked on John, who was, as usual, the only helmeted Spartan in the room.

"On the bright side," Spartan Davis said, redirecting the

conversation. "Whatever it was the Covenant was looking for all this time, the Chief found it."

"How, exactly?" interrupted a timid Doctor Henry Glassman. "If you don't mind me asking."

"I guess it wanted a Reclaimer," Esprit answered. "He pushed a button, and it responded to him."

"You had something they didn't. Something no one saw... but me. Can you guess?"

Doctor Glassman surged forward, only to shrink back slightly once in John's direct presence. "Oh, uhm, may I, Chief?" John handed over the artifact which the doctor eagerly began examining.

"Chief? Any thoughts?" Lasky asked.

"The Didact implied the Librarian had something to do with this," he answered.

"This thing has a lot more to it than just a star chart," McKnight added. "There's a massive amount of data, and it's all heavily encrypted. I've never seen glyphs or an encryption like these."

"Dr. Glassman?" Lasky prompted.

The doctor chuckled, caught between excitement and confusion. "Well, I can tell you it's a map. A star map. With several key locations."

"I think the captain was looking for something we didn't already know," Palmer said sarcastically.

"I'm sorry Commander, but that's about all I can tell you, right now," he replied, not taking his eyes off the map. "I don't know where it leads or to what."

"Roland?"

"Don't look at me, Captain. I've been analyzing since it came aboard. I've got nothing on the obscure symbols, and even accounting for 100,000 years of drift in any direction, these planetary locations don't match any coordinates we have on record."

"They're not the correct locations," Glassman supplied. "Everything is jumbled. This entire database is encrypted, maybe even corrupted, and these stars and planets... They're not... Captain, it's possible we may be looking at a new language."

Lasky's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Have we encountered alternate Forerunner languages before?"

But Glassman was already shaking his head. "This may not even be Forerunner, Captain... This is going to take a while."

"Define 'while,'" Palmer deadpanned.

The doctor shrugged. "I don't know. Could be weeks, maybe even months, before we get through everything. And I may need additional

personnel."

"You'll have whatever you need, Doctor," Lasky assured him.

As the science team followed Glassman out of the bay, Palmer relayed the times for Fireteam Valor's debriefing and dismissed them. The Spartan IVs bawdily started for the exit, teasing and laughing with each other, but they stopped short when they noticed John had not budged.

"That includes you, Chief," Palmer prodded.

John however, had other issues on his mind. He approached the captain. "Sir, will we be pursuing the Covenant fleet?"

Lasky glanced at Roland and then back at John. "Even assuming we could follow them at this point, I'm not sure that would be a good idea. Their numbers were far greater than we anticipated. Damage from the Sentinals' attack notwithstanding, those would still be rough odds for the Infinity. There's also the Atlas to consider, and the news of the Didact's survival; I have to contact Command for direction before making any further decisions."

"Understood," John said. "Captain, I'd like to volunteer to lead the ground team that will pursue the Didact."

Brown eyes locked steadfastly on the golden visor. For a long moment, Lasky said nothing. Then, "I may not have any say in that assignment Chief, but I doubt the brass will have anyone else in mind."

"Thank you, sir," and he turned to go.

"Chief," Lasky stopped him, eyes once again on the visor. "No one else may acknowledge it, but I know this is personal to you," he said quietly. "Normally that would be grounds to keep you off the mission, but you're the best we've got, and we don't have a choice. It's not fair, but it is what it is."

"I prefer it that way."

"I know. Look, all I'm saying isâ€¦ If you ever need someone to talk toâ€¦ As a friend."

"Thank you, sir."

"Tom."

John merely nodded at the correction. "Permission to return to the Spartan Deck."

With a sigh, Lasky said, "Granted," and watched on as the Chief headed toward the door where Fireteam Valor still waited. "Chiefâ€¦" he said when he was sure John was out of earshot, "You've gotta let someone in sometime."

As soon as John reached the doorway, the Spartan IV's burst into conversation again, attempting to draw him in as they made their way to the Armor Room, but he couldn't find it within himself to make a single comment. He trod through the halls listening to their antics and wondered when the next battle would arrive.

"Johnâ€¦ Promise me you'll figure out which one of us is the machine."

TBCâ€¦

****AN:**** I think it's safe to say John got an Unfrigginbelievable medal, along with a handful of Killionaires in this chapter. ;D

End
file.